

**STATEMENT OF RON WILLIAMS
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Before the
SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION AND FORESTRY**

August 13, 2001

Madam Chairman and Members of the Committee. I am Ron Williams, State Conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service in Michigan. Thank you for the opportunity to appear today and provide an update on the conservation programs assisted by the agency that I represent.

As you know, America's farmers are among the most productive in the world. They not only feed our population with the highest quality, safest, and most affordable food anywhere, but also feed others all around the world. American agriculture has been first to adopt new technologies and to change their processes to adapt to changes in the marketplace, to consumer demands, and to changing societal objectives. Today, farmers face a wide array of new concerns, many associated with the use of natural resources. These include the health of our soils, water supply and quality, and air quality issues.

We know that farmers and ranchers want to be good stewards of the land. They know that stewardship is in their best interest of long-term productivity of farming operations. It is an important factor in the maintenance of farm productivity and influences the effective farmability of their land. It is also important to farmers and ranchers who want to leave improved natural resources and a better environment for future generations. The mission of NRCS is to help farmers and ranchers meet the challenge of sustaining their natural resources while maintaining a productive and profitable business.

Today, I would like to highlight the many ways our conservation programs are making a difference around the countryside. Over the past 15 years there has been an increase in the demand for participation in conservation programs. Farmers are utilizing the programs that Congress has provided for a variety of benefits, including managing

nutrients to save on input costs and protect water quality, restoring and protecting wetlands to create wildlife habitat, installing grassed waterways to control erosion, designing grazing systems to increase forage production and manage invasive species, and many other conservation measures.

Land users are using conservation to improve the productivity and sustainability of their operation, while also improving the asset value of their farms and ranches even during times of economic strain. The programs that NRCS manages are for the most part voluntary. We are helping farmers and ranchers meet some of the regulatory pressures they may face. In turn, benefits from conservation programs go well beyond the edge of the farm field. The public also benefits because of cleaner water and improved environmental condition. Madam Chairman, I believe that the conservation programs Congress included in the 1985, 1990, and 1996 Acts, when coupled with our historic conservation programs are proving winners for the farmer, and the country as a whole.

Conservation Technical Assistance

The cornerstone of our conservation activities is the NRCS workforce. The assistance that we provide to land users is contingent upon the talents and technical skills of our field staff around the country. They are trained professionals whom have the technical tools, standards and specifications that get the job done. NRCS has always operated through voluntary cooperative partnerships with individuals, state and local governments, and other Federal agencies and officials. That partnership is even more important today if we are to meet the challenging conservation problems facing our Nation's farmers and ranchers.

While America's farms and ranches are accomplishing much through the existing financial assistance programs, it is important not to lose sight of the need for ongoing Conservation Technical Assistance. For more than 60 years, the NRCS has provided conservation technical assistance and built a foundation of trust with people who voluntarily conserve their natural resources. On average, the Agency's conservation

assistance leverages more than \$1 in contributions for every Federal dollar invested. And through the National Cooperative Soil Survey, approximately, 22,000,000 acres are being mapped each year, so that natural resource decisions are based upon sound science with accurate information.

NRCS works with 3,000 local Conservation Districts that have been established by state law and with American Indian Tribes and Alaska Native Governments. We also assist more than 348 Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Councils. State and local governments contribute substantially, providing both people and funding to complement NRCS technical and financial assistance. Approximately 7,750 full time equivalent staff years are provided annually by State governments, Conservation Districts, and volunteers.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)

Next, I would like to highlight the accomplishments of the Wetlands Reserve Program. WRP preserves, protects, and restores valuable wetlands where historic wetland functions and values have been either depleted or substantially diminished. The program is designed to provide for water quality and flood storage benefits, wildlife habitat, and general aesthetic and open space needs. Approximately 70 percent the WRP project sites are within areas that are frequently subjected to flooding. Restoration of the wetlands helps reduce the severity of future flood events. The WRP is also making a substantial contribution to the restoration of the nation's migratory bird habitats.

As directed in the 1996 Act, WRP enrollment is separated into three components (permanent easements, 30-year easements, and cost-share agreements). Enrollment is being balanced to respond to the level of landowner interest in these three components.

The 1996 Act authorized a total cumulative enrollment of 975,000 acres in the program. At the conclusion of FY 2000, the program had almost reached maximum

enrollment. The FY 2001 appropriations legislation for the Department of Agriculture provided authority for funding an additional 100,000 acres, raising the cumulative enrollment cap to 1,075,000 acres and allowing 140,000 acres to be enrolled in FY 2001.

From inception of the program interest in WRP has been strong. Historically, there have been more than five times as many acres offered than could be enrolled in the program. It is clear from the experience to date that WRP continues to be very popular with farmers and ranchers and is a program that has strong support around the countryside.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program provides up to 75% cost-share for implementing wildlife habitat practices to develop upland wildlife habitat, wetland wildlife habitat, threatened and endangered species habitat as well as aquatic habitat. It also helps landowners support wildlife habitat development, and to develop new partnerships with State wildlife agencies, and nongovernmental entities.

The program was initially funded at a total of \$50 million in the 1996 Act, to be spent over a number of years. As a result of strong interest, those funds were exhausted at the end of FY 1999, at which time 1.4 million acres were enrolled in 8600 long-term wildlife habitat development agreements. For FY 2001, \$12.5 million will be provided for WHIP from funding in Section 211(b) of the Agricultural Risk Protection Act of 2000, as authorized by the FY 2001 appropriations legislation.

Farmland Protection Program (FPP)

The FPP protects prime or unique farmland, lands of State or local importance, and other productive soils from conversion to nonagricultural uses. It requires matching funds from States, Tribes, or local government entities or nonprofits that have farmland

protection programs. It ensures that valuable farmland is preserved for future generations and also helps maintain a healthy environment and sustainable rural economy. The program was initially funded in the 1996 Act at a level of \$35 million. To date, those funds have been exhausted, and local interest in the program continues to be strong. For FY 2001, additional funding provided in the Agricultural Risk Protection Act of 2000 will fund the FPP at \$17.5 million. On June 5, 2001, this funding enabled USDA to approve grants to 28 states, including Michigan, to protect 28,000 acres of farmland.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

EQIP provides technical, financial, and educational assistance to farmers and ranchers who face serious concerns with soil, water, and related natural resources on agricultural land and other land. Consistent with the authorizing legislation, the program is primarily available in priority conservation areas. The priority areas consist of watersheds, regions, or areas of special environmental sensitivity or which have significant soil, water, or related natural resource concerns that have been identified through a locally-led conservation process. For FY 2000, nearly 85 percent of the EQIP financial assistance funding was provided within priority areas.

The program continues to be successful. Over 76,000 farmers and ranchers applied for assistance in FY2000. After the applications were ranked, based on criteria developed at the local and state level, 16,443 long-term contracts were approved. Since inception of the program, demand for the program has remained high around the country.

Conclusion

Madam Chairman, in closing, I would note that good conservation doesn't just happen. It takes all of us, including Congress, conservation partners in the States and Counties, and most importantly, the farmers and ranchers who make a living on the land working together to make it happen. As exemplified through the many programs and activities

that are underway, there is a great deal happening on the ground. The conservation measures that are being applied and maintained on the land are not only helping farmers and ranchers build more productive and economically viable operations, they are also is building a better natural resource base for the future. We are proud of the accomplishments and look forward to working with you to build on all that has been accomplished in the past. This concludes my statement, Madam Chairman, and thank you again for the opportunity to appear. I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee might have.